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CHURCH HISTORY AND PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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The following paper is written by a student of church history, not by a psychologist. It attempts to emphasize, by citing certain specific examples, the importance and necessity of testing historical conclusions by the norm of psychological law. Furthermore, it ventures to criticise the present work of religious psychologists from the historian's point of view, and to suggest certain lines of investigation and verification in which he seems most to need professional assistance.

I

Formal instruction in religious psychology is given in most of our better theological seminaries; and more than this, it has become a commonplace in clerical circles that theologians ought to study psychology. There is thus an enormous amount of desultory reading of psychological treatises and text-books in ministerial studies. Unfortunately, however, a greater part of this study goes no further than a genetic investigation of the religious consciousness in a normal mind. It is Starbuck and his disciples whose writings are read rather than James, of whom indeed I believe it must be said that he writes altogether above the heads of many clerical readers. As a result, there is little reaction upon historical conceptions from the newer scientific knowledge of the human mind; only perhaps in his notions of the Crusades, or of the great religious revivals, is the student of ecclesiastical history directly influenced by his psychological readings. In these two matters his study of the mob-mind in such works as the *Social Psychology* of E. A. Ross inevitably becomes an element in the formation of his historical judgments.

But it is neither the religious experience of normal man nor great popular enthusiasms that most concern the student of ecclesiastical history; usually, the most difficult problem in his investigation of any period must be the understanding of the mind of a religious genius whose dominance over his fellows forms the figures which are printed upon the canvas recording the religious experience of the age. The reactions of normal men and women upon the teachings and examples

of a leader constitute the warp and woof of the fabric, but this must usually remain unwritten and unwritable history; certainly it can never be reconstructed, be it never so tentatively, where one's understanding of the leader is distorted or untrue,—as it is quite certain to be when sympathetic insight into the mental processes of the religious genius is totally wanting.

Much time and labor are spent by modern students of the formative centuries of ecclesiastical history in tracing out, by philological evidence alone, influences and origins of constituent ideas and practices in various systems. Indeed, to some writers the ideal history of the course of religious thought seems to be a genealogical tree of theological "schools." Almost every German scholar who has attempted a *Dogmengeschichte* during the past seventy-five years is obsessed by this idea. Or perhaps a better illustration would be to select from the enormous literature upon Christian Gnosticism such work as is represented by the volumes of Bousset,¹ Anz² and Amélineau,³ who demonstrate respectively that the system sprang from Zoroastrianism, Babylonian astral worship and Coptic magic, each arguing exclusively from the philological antecedent of certain specific terms used by Gnostic writers. All of these scholars know and mention explicitly the religious syncretism which marked the countries and age in which Gnosticism arose,—that strange coexistence and intermingling of all sorts of exotic cults which people frequented in seeming indifference to their inconsistencies and contradictions. Yet, in spite of the established fact of this religious climate, none of the three authors I cite has hesitated to ascribe definite lines of direct derivation where the evidence justifies no further conclusion than the contemporaneous existence of these other religions. With them it is not, as it should be, a commonplace in their historical canon that the religious genius habitually seizes out of the air, as it were, a name or phrase or idea that is current in his day, and weaves it into his own system without the slightest consideration of its origin and proper significance, and often indeed without any further acquaintance with the system to which it originally belonged.

Where the evidence is scanty enough, the fallacy of spinning an elaborate theory of genetic relationship out of philological coincidences is not ridiculously evident; but an attempt to apply exactly the same method to isolated identities, where

¹ W. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, 1911.

² W. Anz, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus*, 1897.

³ E. Amélineau, *Essai sur le gnosticisme égyptien*, 1887.

the general evidence is more complete, will usually lead to all sorts of obvious inconsistencies. For example, in the *Book of Mormon* there are phrases which imply the technical terminology used in a contemporary controversy over baptismal remission which divided the denomination known as Disciples.⁴ If there were extant only the *Book of Mormon* itself and a contemporary anti-Christian polemic writing which contained, as quotations, scattered fragments from sermons by Disciple ministers, a future Bousset or Anz, if he were true to his method, would have to describe Mormonism as a sub-cult or offshoot of the "Disciple School."

For another example of failure to consider in historical deductions obvious mental peculiarities of the religious genius, one may look into the literature which has sprung up around the interpretation of the fact that Jesus spoke of himself as the "Son of Man." All sorts of far-fetched theories are drawn from this phrase in sermonic literature; but the opinions of scientific historians are scarcely less numerous and divergent. Aramaic and Syriac lexicography has been ransacked, arrays of texts are marshalled, and statistical tables compiled therefrom; but all on the tacit assumption that the term in question was deliberately chosen in the first place to represent a clearly defined and fully developed idea, and that it was used in exactly that sense and no other up to the end. So firmly established is this assumption that none of the writers upon the subject, so far as I know them, has given more than passing reference to Ezekiel's use of this term. As he used it, the phrase is simply a circumlocution for "a prophet;" Jesus, during the period reported in the Gospels, undoubtedly meant by the "Son of Man" one greater than the prophets; hence Ezekiel is ignored in favor of Daniel, who uses the term with messianic significance in words quoted by Jesus himself. Yet it is an outstanding fact in the biography of almost any religious genius that his terminology grows with his religious experience. Words that were used early in his career with simple literal significance are gradually filled with new meaning, until they become so highly technical that only a mind saturated with the whole doctrine may fully appreciate them. In the same way it is not a rare phenomenon to find a religious innovator whose system is directly influenced by the choice of his terminology. If in the teaching of other men he discovers connotations and definitions of certain words that he himself has used almost by

⁴ Wm. A. Linn, *The Story of the Mormons*, 1902, 93 (footnote).

chance, he may unhesitatingly graft these new ideas into his own system.

If in the light of these psychological peculiarities we suppose that Jesus, early in his career, still looking upon himself as one of the religious leaders known as prophets, adopted Ezekiel's habit of designating himself as the "Son of Man;" and then, in the development of his messianic consciousness, brooding over the Daniel prediction, gradually added to the simple significance the more complex and technical connotation; we shall have a theory which will not only meet the facts of the case but which has the additional strength of support by psychological parallels in the history of other religious founders.

But nowhere perhaps in historical investigation is there greater need of a correct canon of psychological interpretation than in those problems which are concerned with pseudographic writings. To speak of these as forgeries and plagiarisms is to introduce ethical considerations which any study of the abnormalities of religious genius will show are entirely lacking. A greater part of Biblical criticism involves questions concerning documents of just this kind; and it would sometimes seem that the most formidable obstacle in the path towards a scientific solution of the problem is that complex of prejudices and repugnances which arises in most minds the moment it is suggested that a particular document is not from the hand of the author which it claims. The naïve procedure of a pupil who cuts out of his Bible every word and passage that any writer has declared "not authentic" is scarcely less scientific than the refusal of 'conservative' writers on Biblical criticism and patrology to consider evidence and arguments that they would accept unhesitatingly were the documents in question of secular instead of ecclesiastical origin.

There is, for example, the problem of the *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*, which is still accepted by many modern scholars as of Pauline authorship, though perhaps the majority have come to deny its authenticity, on the grounds of its formal verbal identities with the *First Epistle*, and its explicit denial of doctrine propounded in that document. The general tone of the *First Epistle* is benignant, enthusiastic and impetuous; and it speaks of the second coming of the Lord as imminent, during the lifetime of the writer and those he addresses. The general tone of the *Second Epistle* is chiding, repressive and authoritative; and it teaches that before the second coming of the Lord certain events must occur, and presumably that

ages will first elapse. Furthermore, it denounces roundly those who refuse to perform their routine duties in life. Besides the fact that most of the introduction follows the *First Epistle* word for word, there is the significant statement that the letter is written lest "ye . . . be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by *epistle as from us*, as that the day of the Lord is just at hand . . ."

To reconstruct in the following terms the circumstances under which this second document was written, is not, it would seem, a gratuitous flight of the imagination, but as scientific a procedure by the laws of psychological analogies as it is for a palaeontologist to sketch an extinct animal from the evidence of some fossil bones. Certain early Christians were so impressed with the imminence of the Second Advent that they dropped the distractions of routine life and gave themselves entirely to contemplation and preparation for the catastrophe. In refutation of their fellows who disputed this theory, they exhibited as the words of Paul what we now have as the *First Epistle*. Among the anti-adventists who refused to be silenced by this argument was one who offered in refutation, not a rival interpretation of the passage, but a whole-hearted denial that Paul wrote the words at all; some evil-minded person had forged the whole epistle or had tampered with the text. Next, brooding over the matter, he undertook to rewrite the epistle as Paul probably had written it, copying exactly the insignificant introduction, but changing entirely the doctrinal portion, omitting the personal references that had only temporary significance, but warning explicitly against forgery as if it were foreseen, and railing at those who refused to work. With the revision once written, the next easy and final step would be the gradual conviction in the mind of the revisor that the document thus produced was wrought under divine inspiration or by the miraculous spiritual dictation of Paul himself. Later generations, ignorant of the local controversy of their fathers, would, of course, treasure both documents without distinction since each professed to be from the hand of the revered apostle.

II

These three examples of the ecclesiastical historian's direct application of methods and materials that are purely psychological are given, not so much for their intrinsic value, as in the hope that such a concrete presentation of sample problems may start some psychological reader upon investigations consciously directed towards the solution of other historical

questions. For there are numerous matters in which generalizations derived casually from readings in religious biography cannot meet the needs of the historian; in these he must await the scientific pronouncements of the professional psychologist. It may not, therefore, be amiss if, before sketching the main outlines of a few of these open questions, I attempt to describe the kind of solution that will best meet the needs of historical investigation.

In the first place, it must always be borne in mind that history is concerned with immediate, not ultimate psychical causation. However important the primitive origin of any given psychical manifestation may be in the eyes of pure science, it is only those phases which emerge from the mental surface that belong to the field of history. Psychoanalysis may be able to trace the religious ideas of an individual behind the veil of his consciousness, but the historian has no right or authority to penetrate that dim realm. Roughly speaking, it may be said that the historical record of any religious figure is complete when it has accurately described what he believed that he believed, how he presented his belief, and the way in which his followers understood that presentation; in the main, the course of religious history consists of little more than an overlapping series of these triple elements.

It is extremely unfortunate, so far as the study of history is concerned, that modern psychology is so largely analytical and so sparingly descriptive. In a science so young it is natural, of course, that the general problems should be worked and reworked many times before specific manifestations can be brought to the front; but the religious historian awaits somewhat impatiently the growth of an adequate mass of studies of specific religious types. Though it be not altogether just, he is inclined to complain that in general, when psychologists do treat of religious phenomena, they use such matters only to illustrate some broader psychological hypothesis, or that frequently, being interested in the main thesis, their selection of fact is not a happy one.

Similarly, in the eyes of the historian, it is unfortunate that in discussing religious experiences the psychologist so frequently uses imperfect written records rather than first-hand, modern sources. Looking at the field in a broad way, one can not but be struck by the fact that there is a situation which may be caricatured in these terms: one writer describes the psychology of Joanna Southcott by analogy to that of Joseph Smith, another justifies his estimate of Joseph Smith by the presence of similar mental peculiarities in Joanna Southcott.

But it is inevitable that such cross-arguments must continue until we have adequate scientific studies by competent psychologists upon contemporary religious founders. The religious genius is always with us; probably, if one were to count them over, he would find no decade since 1800 which has not seen the establishment in America of a new religion which won more converts during the first twenty-five years of its existence than did Christianity in its first two centuries. No generation lacks its believers in a gospel written yesterday, or even in a contemporary incarnation of divinity. The historian cannot express too emphatically his hope that the religious psychologist will leave to him the biographies of Joanna Southcott, and will go out with a note-book to some dingy hall where a new gospel is preached. Nor can he repress a sigh of regret when he notices that James entered on his career in the Philosophical Department of Harvard one year before Mrs. Eddy opened her "Massachusetts Metaphysical College" in Boston, and then remembers how many of the "varieties" James chose to describe were drawn from the pages of eighteenth century Quaker biographies. Indeed, the same historian must not be judged too harshly if he sometimes declares that James' work, as a psychological treatise, is inferior to Howells' "Leatherstocking God," despite the admixture of fiction in the latter.

III

The problems themselves that demand solution are obvious. Division of the individuals to be described into three classes according to their respective functions in the course of a religious movement will show (*a*) the religious genius, (*b*) his personal disciples, and (*c*) ordinary adherents to the system. The groups produced by this functional classification seem to show distinct types of temperament, which deserve separate study.

Of the first of these little more need here be said. The generalizations that the historian has made concerning the psychological abnormalities of the religious genius need verification and restatement; and undoubtedly there remain more traits and habits of mind common to this type which will be discovered only by careful comparative study of living subjects. It has already been pointed out that material for such first-hand investigation is usually available.

In the examples cited in the first part of this paper we have not mentioned the second group, the personal disciples of a founder. These disciples seem to have played an important

part in the development of every religious movement. Though they lack the leader's originality, their influence may have been more or less decisive both by their polarization of his teachings as it passed through them to others, and by the reflex action of their understanding of his message upon the master's own final formulation of it. Usually historical sources preserve but little record of these disciples beyond their names, yet now and again one catches hints of the characteristics common to this type,—abnormal willingness to believe, fiery enthusiasm, unbounded liberality to "The Cause," and a lack of candor, often approaching deliberate trickiness, but without that common sense in practical values that sometimes stands out so amazingly in the genius himself.

In the third class the characteristics of the type will usually be found in the highest development in the official clergy; but any study of these professional religionists must be corrected by a corresponding examination of representative laymen, that due allowance may be made for the elements that belong, not to the religious experience, but to the office. That the different religions present specific types and sub-types must be the conviction of every curious observer; whether or not these types are persistent and amenable to classification is another question. Certainly the value of such classification, should it prove practicable, would be so great that one may hesitate to pass over as valueless even so frivolous an observation as Mozley's remark concerning "evangelical shallowness;" "How is it that goodness, poverty, and a certain amount of literary and religious ambition produce an unpleasant effect on the skin?"⁵

From the historian's side these characteristics, whether they be cause or effect, are of supreme importance; if certain temperaments are attracted by corresponding climates in religion there will follow, in the course of years, a reflex action upon the religion itself, tending toward more exact conformity with the religious taste of that temperament. If the existence of such a reaction can be definitely established, it will do much towards explaining on rational grounds the frequent recurrence in religious history of particular phenomenal series. Some writers are inclined to explain these on genealogical lines, bridging any chronological gap with a bold hypothesis of direct influence, while others, with less success, seek to explain them by laws drawn from a philosophy of history devised to meet

⁵ T. Mozley, *Reminiscences chiefly of Oriel College and the Oxford Movement*, 2nd ed., i., 1882, 243.

the occasion; still other writers are content to remark that religious history persistently "repeats itself."

In the same way it is probable that the development of descriptive religious psychology will produce much material of importance in the solution of analytical problems. For example, those disquieting figures that appear in every religious body, who admit in private without scruple that they disbelieve in the possibility of any religion at all, and in public are the most zealous observers and advocates of their official creed down to its smallest denominational peculiarities, will probably be found to represent a distinct type of religious experience. Because these men appear most frequently in ritualistic circles, it is often said of them that "their religion is purely aesthetic." If this phrase, which sounds like an explanation, be true, it will be a fact of enormous significance in any attempt to define the religious sense. If on the other hand, as seems more probable, the religious experience of such men is really religious despite the denials of their materialistic metaphysics, that likewise will be a fact of far reaching implications.

Finally, it will be noticed that not until there has been accumulated an enormous bulk of descriptive investigations will it be possible to define the religious experience of normal human nature. Religion necessarily offers many attractions to the abnormal human mind; the high proportion of freaks in any group of religious has persuaded not only many laymen but some scientific men as well that all religious experience is fundamentally pathogenic. Whether this be true or not is, however, a matter of no great significance either for the historian or the psychologist; to both "religion is an incident in human history and a manifestation of human nature," and as such will remain an object for scientific study.